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AUTHOR Peyton, Joy Kreeft; Rigg, Pat
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ABSTRACT

Poetry can be used in the adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom with all learners, even those with limited literacy and proficiency in English. Learners can read, discuss, and write about poems and how they speak to their lives. They can create poems of their own to express their feelings, thoughts, or beliefs. This digest suggests ways to select and use poetry in adult language and literacy classes and provides information about poetry collections and resources for further reading. Choosing poems related to a single theme can build knowledge and vocabulary focused on a specific topic. Teachers may want to consider trying to publish the poems of their students, too. As with any writing about personal experiences, poems can become part of a larger exploration of a theme as a class considers, reads, and writes about related cultural, social, economic, and political issues. Poetry provides adults with rich learning opportunities in language, content, and community building. Repetition of words and structures typifies poetry, and poetry encourages language play with rhythmic and rhyming devices. Poetic themes are often universal. When teachers and learners write and read poetry together, they connect with texts and with one another in powerful ways. (Contains 24 references.) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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Poetry in the Adult ESL Classroom

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Poetry can be used in adult English as a second language (ESL) classes with all learners, even those with limited literacy and proficiency in English. Learners can read, discuss, and write about poems and how they speak to their life situations. They can also create poems of their own to express their feelings, thoughts, or beliefs. This digest discusses ways to select and use poetry in adult language and literacy classes and provides information about poetry collections and resources for further reading.

Selecting Poetry

Choosing poems related to a single theme can build a knowledge base and vocabulary focused on a specific topic. For example, the three themes of the Equipped for the Future initiative (Stein, 1997)—work, civic participation, and family life—provide a framework for theme development. The poetry collection *Paperwork*, edited by Tom Wayman, contains hundreds of poems about the realities of daily work, written from workers' perspectives. Poems focus on outdoor work and office work, paid and unpaid work, as well as transitions such as retirement, unemployment, and looking for work. The following excerpt from this book comes from "Margaret's Party" by Joni Miller:

> Today everyone quits working
> Ten minutes early and scuttles down to the lunchroom.
>
> Margaret is retiring
> 25 years of service..... (and so on)

Other collections of poems about work that might be appropriate for an adult ESL class are *For a Living: The Poetry of Work*; *More than Our Jobs: An Anthology*; and *Speaking Out on Work: An Anthology by New Writers* (which includes poetry and prose selections). Kazemek and Rigg (1995) provide poems about work as well.

Poetry collections that explore the themes of community life and family life are *Pocket Poems: Selected for a Journey*; *Words on the Page, the World in Your Hand* (written, selected, and adapted by contemporary writers for adults in literacy programs); and *Waltzing on Water: Poetry by Women*. Well-known American poets Carl Sandburg (e.g., *Harvest Poems*), Lucille Clifton (e.g., *Good News About the Earth*), William Carlos Williams (e.g., *The William Carlos Williams Reader*), and Langston Hughes (e.g., *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*) have written energetic poetry rooted in the commonplace and focused on everyday themes and people. Their poems provide glimpses into U.S. history and culture, and use colloquial language with simple, eloquent repetition. (See Kazemek & Rigg, 1986, 1995, for lists of other appropriate poetry collections and discussion of their use).

In addition to considering content and theme, other features should be taken into account. Everyday language is easier to read and understand than literary language and is used in some of the most beautiful poetry. Predictable language patterns, repeated language (words, phrases, or lines), and identifiable rhythm make poetry easy to read. Because rhyme can result in strange diction or unnatural syntax, rhymed poetry should be examined carefully before being used with adult learners.

With "Margaret's Party" (or any poem) the class might go through the following process.

1. The class talks about work, how they feel about their jobs, and brainstorms vocabulary. They look at pictures of people at work and talk about how these people feel.

2. The teacher reads the poem aloud a couple of times and then passes out a print version for learners to read and discuss.

3. Learners read other poems about the theme (e.g., work) individually or in small groups and discuss them, possibly talking about which poems best connect with their own lives and experiences.

4. The teacher shares with the class a poem that the teacher has written about work and talks about the process of creating the poem.

5. Learners begin to write their own poems. They think about their first job or their worst job, telling their stories in pairs or small groups and then jotting notes to begin to craft a poem. They will probably want to spend some time writing alone, but they can share their ideas or their developing or finished texts with others at any time. For adult language learners, this process of group writing can be especially useful: The group discussions generate the vocabulary and structures needed to write in the second language, and the learners develop teamwork skills, which are skills needed in today's world.

6. At appropriate points in the process of reading and writing poetry, the class can focus on specific aspects of poetic craft as well as on language and poetic structures (see McConochie, 1982, for strategies for using poems to spark discussions about language and poetic structures).

Publishing Poetry

Poems can be published in a variety of ways—in books put together within the program or sold by commercial publishers (e.g., Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford, 1991; Wall, 1991), in community or program newsletters, on Web sites, or posted around the classroom for viewing and comment. Bello (1997) and Peyton (1993) describe the writing process, from drafting to publishing.

As with any writing about personal experiences, poems can become part of a larger exploration of a theme, as the class considers, reads, and writes about related cultural, social, economic, and political issues (Auerbach, 2000 and Weinstein, 1999 describe ways to do this). Prose collections about people's jobs that can be included in such a study are *Working* by Studs Terkel (1974) and *The Foxfire Book* edited by Eliot Wiggington (1972).

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Types of Poems

Another way to approach the reading and writing of poetry is to focus on different types of poems.

- *Object poems* can be written about things easily brought to class, following the style of the well-known poem by William Carlos Williams "This is just to say" (about plums). Kazemek and Rigg (1995) describe using these and the other poetic forms described here, with examples of each type.
- *Alphabet poems* involve writing letters down the side of a page to spell one or more words (such as one's name) and using those letters as the initial letter of a word or more for each line:

Me	**N**ewcomer
Young	**A**unt
	Mother
	English learner

- *List poems* are similar to alphabet poems, except that instead of relying on the alphabetic structure, they describe something by compiling a long or short list of words related to the person or thing:

  Children:
  Running, laughing, and shouting
  Small and wiry (and so on)

- Learners write a *group poem* by listing items related to a theme and then rearranging them into a poetic style.
- Learners can be shown how to find poems in their environment (*found poems*). Poetic elements can be found in conversations or in notes, shopping lists, or letters. William Carlos Williams' "This is just to say" (I have eaten/ the plums/that were in/the icebox....), originally written as a note left for his wife, is an example of a found poem as well as an object poem.
- When poems written as *conversations* are read aloud, they provide opportunities to consider and develop (in new poems) multiple perspectives on a wide range of topics. Paul Fleishman's "Honeybees" (in *Joyful Noise*) can be included in a theme-based study of poems about work.

Being a bee	Being a bee
	Is a joy
Is a pain	
	I'm a queen
I'm a worker	
I'll gladly explain.	I'll gladly explain.
	... (and so on)

Conclusion

Poetry provides adults with rich learning opportunities in language, content, and community building. Repetition of words and structures typifies poetry, and poetry encourages language play with rhythmic and rhyming devices. Poetic themes are often universal, at the same time giving insights into individuals' lives, cultures, beliefs, and practices. When teachers and learners write and read poetry together, they connect with texts and with one another other in powerful ways.

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